

Proposal to double campaign donation limits gets an unlikely objector

Racine millionaire wants campaign giving limits abolished

By: Daniel Bice – June 9, 2013

Racine millionaire Fred M. Young Jr. can't give enough of his cash to politicians. Over the past decade, the retired executive has donated hundreds of thousands of dollars to Republican candidates and conservative groups. Just last year, he gave nearly \$30,000 to Gov. Scott Walker to fend off a recall effort, and he and his wife dropped the maximum \$10,000 to help 10 Republicans running for the state Assembly in the final weeks before the 2012 election.

So you might think Young would be thrilled with the effort by state Assembly leaders to push through legislation to double the amount donors can give to politicians in a calendar year.

Not so.

"It's dumb," said Young, who believes the proposal doesn't go far enough.

State law, which has been in effect for nearly 40 years, bars contributors from giving more than \$10,000 cumulatively to Wisconsin political candidates in a calendar year. In a compromise bill released Friday night, Assembly Republicans and Democrats are proposing to increase the annual donation cap to \$20,000.

In addition, the legislation would double the amount donors can give candidates for state office, meaning those running for governor, attorney general or Supreme Court justice could receive up to \$20,000 from each supporter, up from \$10,000. Limits for Assembly candidates would jump from \$500 to \$1,000 and for Senate candidates from \$1,000 to \$2,000.

Mike McCabe, head of the left-leaning Wisconsin Democracy Campaign, has argued that the changes would bring a flood of campaign money into the state.

He pointed to last year's recall effort, during which the donation limits were relaxed for Walker's campaign before state regulators authorized the election, allowing Young and others to exceed the \$10,000 limit. He dismissed the suggestions by party leaders that raising the limits would simply bring greater transparency to the political process with no increase in funds.

"That's demonstrably false," McCabe said.

But if the do-gooders aren't happy with the proposal, neither is the deep-pocketed Young.

McCabe's group filed a complaint with state regulators in 2010 accusing Young of breaking the law by giving \$10,500 to Walker. Young said the compromise legislation doesn't fix the problem.

Under the proposal, which is to be voted on in Assembly committee on Monday, Young could write a check for \$20,000 to a gubernatorial candidate. But if he did, the annual donor limit would then keep him from being able to give any money to other politicians or political action committees for up to a year.

That makes no sense to Young.

"It makes me angry the damn statute exists," he said.

...So Young is not waiting on his Republican friends in the Legislature to eliminate the cap.

He filed a lawsuit in federal court just last week, arguing that the limit on annual campaign contributions is an unconstitutional restriction on his free speech. Rick Esenberg, president and general counsel of the Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty, filed the suit for Young. Esenberg said he has long been interested in challenging the state law.

Esenberg also said it was a "no brainer" for him to hook up with Young, who sold his radiator business for more than \$70 million in the late '90s. Young is a board member of the Cato Institute, a Libertarian think tank, a backer of the advocacy group SpeechNow.org and a Reason Foundation trustee.

It is simply a coincidence, Esenberg said, that the suit is being filed at the same time that legislative leaders are considering lifting the lid.

"This has been in the works a long time," Esenberg said of the litigation.

The stakes could potentially be very big.

Records show Young and his wife, Sandra, have given about \$103,000 directly to Wisconsin candidates and more than \$300,000 to Club for Growth and other conservative organizations over the past decade.

McCabe said he can't believe Assembly Speaker Robin Vos isn't proposing the change in the donation cap in response to Young's complaints. Young has been a longtime financial backer of Vos, a Rochester Republican.

"I don't think there's any coincidence that a Racine captain of industry wants these limits to go away and the Assembly speaker also wants that," McCabe said.

But Young said he first heard that Vos and other Assembly leaders might be raising the annual contribution cap when No Quarter disclosed it last week. Young said he fired off an email to Vos asking him to remove the limit altogether. Young said he hasn't gotten a response.

Eventually, the 71-year-old Racine Republican activist may get his way.

The Assembly bill is a compromise proposal that has the support of lawmakers in both parties. Increasing the donor limits would put more money under the control of both political parties and the legislative leaders from each side of the aisle.

But Vos said Friday night that he agrees philosophically with Young. The two have talked about the issue, Vos said, for many years.

"I have never believed in the aggregate limit," Vos said.

But he's taking what he can get — for now.

Center of attention

A vote by the Legislature's budget-writing committee to oust a journalism center from the University of Wisconsin-Madison's campus has touched off a major spat between Milwaukee's two conservative talk-radio titans.

Charlie Sykes, whose morning show airs on WTMJ-AM (620), ripped the Republican-controlled Joint Finance Committee for its early morning vote to evict the nonpartisan Wisconsin Center for Investigative Journalism from its offices at UW-Madison. Sykes called the vote "petty" and "vindictive."

But fellow Milwaukee talker Mark Belling — with an afternoon show on WISN-AM (1130) — came out with a full-throated endorsement of the legislative panel's vote, calling it a "brazen conflict of interest" for a news organization to receive free office space from a government entity.

Off air, Belling expressed outrage that his longtime radio competitor was speaking out for what Belling views as a left-leaning journalism center.

"I will remind you Charlie is the author of 'A Nation Of Moochers' in which he decried the very mooching he is defending," Belling said by email to No Quarter.

Sykes playfully responded, "Book plug! Do I need to pay him royalties?"